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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

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TO: AJC Area Directors/CRCs

FROM: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

DATE: February 18, 1976

RE: VATICAN-ISLAMIC CONFERENCE IN LIBYA, FEBRUARY 1-5

This office has received a number of inquiries during the past week asking for clarification as to what happened at the Vatican-Islamic meeting in Libya from Feb. 1 through 5, and its possible implications for Vatican-Jewish-Israeli relations. The following report is based on conversations with the AJC Paris office, with sources in Rome, and especially on detailed conversations I had with Catholic representatives who attended the Libyan meeting.

The five-day seminar on Islamic-Christian relations was co-sponsored by the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians and the Libyan Arab Republic. The conference was held in the large modern 800-seat "Liberation Theater" building in Tripoli, that is fully equipped for simultaneous translations in Arabic, French and English, with Radio and TV transmission facilities. Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, Libyan president, paid all the travel expenses for the Catholic and other Christian participants. The official delegations consisted of 14 Vatican and 16 Muslim representatives from 10 countries. There were, however, some 300 observers and 120 mass media people present from some 43 countries with Muslim populations. One informant told me that Qaddafi spent "well over a million dollars" for this meeting. Cardinal Serge Pignedoli, president of the Vatican secretariat, in his opening remarks praised "the generous hospitality" of the Libyan Arab Republic.

The announced purpose of the seminar -- described by Father Thomas C. Donlan, O.P., as "the first time since before the Crusades (that) official delegations of the Islamic and Christian faiths have met" -- was to increase understanding and collaboration between Christians and Moslems, an altogether laudable objective. In an Islamic newsletter dated as early as January 2, 1976, the editor, Muhammad Tahir, announced that the "Islamic agenda" for the seminar was the following:

"The dialogue is certain to center around Colonel Qaddafi's Third International Theory which calls for the unity of God-fearing men and women to struggle together to overcome some of the common enemies of Capitalism, Communism, Zionism, Racism, and materialism."

Since this was originally intended as a pan-Christian and pan-Islamic conference, the Vatican Secretariat invited representatives of the World Council of Churches, the Copts and the Eastern Orthodox. The World Council and the Copts declined, reportedly indicating unhappiness that Libya was subsidizing the meeting.

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But the Orthodox patriarchate of Damascus accepted, and, at the last minute, the Moscow Orthodox patriarchate also agreed to attend.

Four themes composed the seminar agenda: 1) Whether religion can be effective in guiding men's lives today; 2) Whether religion must concern itself with social justice; 3) What common bases are shared by Islam and Christianity; and 4) What antagonistic prejudices exist among adherents of the two faiths and what steps can be taken to overcome them?

My informants tell me that the Vatican officials insisted prior to the conference that there would be no political discussions, especially with regard to the Middle East, since these were outside the competence of this secretariat. Apparently the Muslim officials agreed to these ground rules. At each morning session (from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.) a Christian and a Muslim scholar presented papers on each of the themes listed above. At the evening sessions, from 5 to 9 p.m., discussion was held based on the morning presentations.

The Vatican spokesmen, both in their papers and in the discussions, avoided all political issues, and spoke generally in a spirit of good-will typified by Cardinal Pignedoli's remarks: "We begin our dialogue in a spirit of fraternity. Not to affront each other, not to judge each other reciprocally and not to minimize our respective faiths. We begin with full respect and with full love one for the other." Muslim speakers also began with expressions of good-will, but regularly interspersed their remarks with strong attacks on Zionism, the Crusades, Christian missionaries, Western civilization and imperialism.

The one-sided Muslim attack on Christian imperialism had some effect. On the final day of the seminar, a White Father missionary from Tunisia, French Father Jacques Lanfry, invited the Christians in the audience to condemn Christian "errors of the past," and to rid themselves of "present prejudices and misunderstandings" in relation to the religion of Islam. Turning to the Islamic delegation, the priest pleaded for "forgiveness" of his "Muslim brothers" for "misunderstandings, injustices, and erroneous criticisms" on the part of Christians towards "the Prophet Mohammed and his followers." Suddenly, two Imams (senior Muslim religious leaders) got up from their places in the front row, went up to Father Lanfry and warmly embraced him. The entire assembly burst into applause. There was no comparable Muslim "confiteor" for persecutions or massacres of Christians (not to speak of Jews) in the past or present (i.e., Sudan, Uganda, Lebanon, etc.).

Later that morning, a Muslim participant suggested that a mixed Islamic-Christian commission be created and dispatched as a messenger of peace to such places as Lebanon, the Philippines, and Northern Ireland. Msgr. Pietro Rossano, secretary of the Vatican Secretariat, turned down the proposal saying that intervention in such areas was best left to United Nations agencies.

While all this was going on, a joint committee consisting of four Vatican representatives and four Muslims were meeting to draft a communique for the conference. The Christian members were an Arab who is the chief officer for Islam of the Vatican Secretariat, Melkite Catholic Archimandrite Francis Abou-Mokh; and three Arabic-speaking Western Christians: Father Ary Roest Crolius, a Jesuit professor of Islamic Studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and a secretariat consultant; Father Maurice Boormans and Jacques Lanfry.

According to my informants, a decision was made to split the drafting committee into four pairs--one Christian and one Muslim--each pair being assigned to evaluate a separate section of the 24-point text that was prepared by the Muslim drafting group. As it turned out, the Christian drafters saw only the section they worked on, and signed that section. Only Archimandrite Abou-Mokh initialed each page of the entire document that was presented to the conference as "the final declaration". Abou-Mokh, not incidentally, told my informant that he personally supported the anti-Israel and anti-Zionist positions in paragraphs 20 and 21 of the text, but that he also realized that his was not an official Vatican approval. (A good constructive influence to have as an official member of a Vatican Secretariat!)

The full text of the declaration is attached. Articles 20 and 21 read as follows:

Recommendation number 20 (also called a resolution, although it was not subject to any vote on the part of the Vatican delegation) reads as follows:

"The two sides look upon the heavenly religions with respect and accordingly they distinguish between Judaism and Zionism, the latter being a racial aggressive movement, foreign to Palestine and the Middle Eastern region."

Recommendation (resolution) number 21 --also not subject to any Vatican delegation vote-- says: "Adherence to truth, justice, and peace, and belief in the rights of peoples for self-determination prompt the two sides to affirm the national rights of the Palestinian people and their right to return to their homeland, and to affirm the Arabism of the city of Jerusalem and the rejection of (its) Judaization, partition, and internationalization."

"(The two sides) denounce all violation of all sacred places. (They) demand the setting free of all detainees in occupied Palestine... and ask for the liberation of all (Israeli) occupied lands, and call for the formation of a permanent commission to investigate the alteration of sacred Muslim and Christian sites and reveal this to world public opinion."

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The final declaration was presented to the conference by a Muslim delegate at the closing session on Friday afternoon. Neither Cardinal Pignedoli, nor Msgr. Rossano, nor other members of the Vatican delegation who were not involved in its preparation were given the courtesy of seeing the text in advance of its introduction, nor were they aware that it contained the anti-Israel paragraphs. In fact, Cardinal Pignedoli at this point was taken conveniently to the palace of Colonel Qaddafi for a very lengthy private audience.

When Msgr. Rossano finally got a Spanish translation of the Arabic text, he said, "It is a mistake, a mistake!" Father Boormans, who authored two good papers for the conference, said he was "crushed," called it "the blackest day of my life. Everybody lost, only Qaddafi won." Interestingly, Dr. Ezhaddin Ibrahim, Minister of Cultural Affairs of the United Arab Emirates and a member of the Muslim delegation, said privately that, "if an objection had been made during the drafting, the Muslim group was prepared to withdraw articles 20 and 21."

The next day, on arriving in Rome, Cardinal Pignedoli issued a statement at a press conference and over Vatican Radio in which he "disassociated" himself "not only as a Vatican representative, but as a Christian, "from the position taken in the two paragraphs "by our Muslim brothers". The cardinal added that "the contents" of the paragraphs were to be transmitted to "the authorities of the Holy See ((Secretariat of State) who alone have competence in this matter," since "political elements" enter into it.

Reporting on this event, the Vatican City newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, quoted Cardinal Pignedoli as saying that he could not sign the document that contains points "beyond my jurisdiction". The prelate was then quoted as saying that the statements on Zionism, the Palestinians, and Jerusalem remained solely "the expression of the Muslim delegation."

On the following Tuesday, representatives of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) made a formal demarche to the Vatican Secretariat of State and asked for a clarification on the highest levels. They indicated that such repudiation of the document was necessary before the March 1 meeting between the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations with Judaism and IJCIC could take place in Jerusalem.

The next day, Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, Deputy Secretary of the Vatican Secretariat of State (and one of its most influential and authoritative spokesmen) issued a statement that was published on the front page of L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican authority stated that paragraphs 20 and 21 of the Tripoli declaration had been examined by "competent Vatican authorities." He added, "The Holy See declares that it cannot accept these two articles because their content does not correspond in essential points to the position, known to all, of the Holy See."

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That clarifying statement was telephoned to a New York meeting of IJCIC representatives that Bert Gold and I attended, and all the Jewish groups present agreed that the clarification was adequate and acceptable and that plans for the March 1 meeting in Jerusalem should proceed. We agreed, however, that the entire Libyan episode must be placed on the agenda of the Jerusalem meeting for a full airing, with a view toward trying to assure that such anti-Israel entrapments are not allowed to happen again.

It should be made clear that while Vatican spokesmen indicated they were "mortified" by this event, they were trying to prevent the incident from compromising what they regard as "the basically positive achievements at the religious level with Islam" of the Libyan seminar. Undoubtedly, there will be other Vatican-Islamic "dialogues" and there will be inevitable attempts to repeat the exploitation of such meetings for anti-Israel and anti-Jewish purposes by Muslim officials. "Sufficient to the wise is a wink," says the Talmud.

Two noteworthy points: a) The reference in article 21 to "the liberation of all detainees in occupied Palestine, above all the Moslem Ulema and the Christian clergy" was drafted with specific reference to the release of Cardinal Capucci, and is part of an ongoing Arab campaign against Israel; b) The Muslims did not allow a single reference in the document to evangelization or the mission of the Church. On the contrary, they asserted (p. 28, in the full text), "The Moslem side affirmed the power of Islam to establish a system for life and for society valid for all times and places, springing from a comprehensive outlook on the universe and life, characterized by originality, balance and realism."

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FULL TEXT OF ISLAMIC-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE (3,000)

Editors: Following is a provisory translation of the Arabic-language recommendations and resolutions of the Seminar of Islamic-Christian Dialogue held in Tripoli, Libya, Feb. 1-6. NC News is sending it subject to correction, and the later insertion of parts garbled in transmission. Such garbled parts are indicated by ellipes.)

In the name of God, the All Merciful, the All Compassionate, under the motto: "Invite all to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching" (Koran), and: "Let us search for what supports peace and brotherhood."

In an atmosphere of confidence and optimism and bearing the mutual responsibility toward...who is threatened by real danger, the Seminar of Islamic-Christian Dialogue has been held in the city of Tripoli in the Libyan Arab Republic during the period 1 - 6 Safer, 1396, A.H. [Moslem calendar], corresponding to 1 - 6 February 1976, Vatican. A number of Moslem and Christian thinkers from most of the countries of the world participated. Moreover, observers from among the Moslem ulemas [Theological and legal scholars] and the Christian clergy of the Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Protestant churches attended the seminar together with thinkers, politicians, newsmen and men of the information media who came from more than 60 countries of the world.

The aim of holding this seminar was the creation of a new atmosphere of mutual confidence between the Moslem and Christian worlds, with the view to eliminating different sediments of periods of remoteness, of dispute and colonialism, and to explore the...thereof, and to joint effort...and to being concerned with constructing bridges of understanding and cooperation among the believers of the two religions in order to create the suitable atmosphere that helps to understand what modern man inherently suffers from the material and spiritual crises facing him and to submit practical solutions thereto. They are confident that religion is the authentic source

which is able to achieve these objectives, for religion is not only spiritual values, but embraces the coordination between matter and the devotion of the spirit.

Humanity groans under the yoke of many grievances, and the man of today lives in a continuous vacuum, anxiety, spiritual alienation and remoteness from stability and happiness. He lives in burning fire caused by the materialistic tyranny which pervades the world and which is curtaining him from the sources of goodness, truth and mercy which religion represents...their real authentic source.

The fight for the liberation of man from all forms of ignorance, tyranny, oppression and exploitation springs from the heart of religion, and constitutes, therefore, a duty of every pious man. There are priorities which no divine religion can be lenient with, or tarry in defending...

In the light of these concepts the following topics were discussed:

1. Is it possible for religion to be an ideology for life?
2. The common bases of beliefs and spheres of meeting together in all fields of life.
3. Social Justice, a fruit of belief in God.
4. How can we eliminate faulty prejudices and weak confidence which still separate us from each other?

In each topic two scholars, a Moslem and a Christian, participated, each expressing the point of view of the side he represents. A positive dialogue took place, characterized by frankness and clearness, and in an atmosphere of open thinking and engaged responsibility in which both parties affirmed the power of religion to contain the developing circumstances of this age.

Both parties have agreed that religion is superior to all ideologies.

The Moslem side affirmed the power of Islam to establish a system for life and for society valid for all times and places, springing from a comprehensive outlook on the universe and life, characterized by originality, balance and realism. The Christian side also affirmed that Christianity concerns itself in the first instance with the spiritual aspect, and that it should commit itself, as a religion, to inspire ideologies.

The two parties have also reviewed the problems of doctrine in both religions. The two religions meet in the belief in one God, the only one, in spite of the difference of their concepts of a number of problems of doctrine. Both parties affirmed the necessity of undertaking joint efforts to support and exalt spiritual values and ethical principles and the happiness of men.

The points of view of the two parties also met in considering social justice as a natural fruit of belief in God, as tyranny, in all its forms, contradicts the spirit of religion and divine books. The Moslem side affirmed that Islam presents an integral system for social justice in all its aspects, be they humane, social or economic. The Christian side also affirmed that Christianity directs man in his behavior with the view to realizing social justice and that the Christian church has undertaken many initiatives in the fields of social education and its application.

In an atmosphere of frankness and genuine desire to overlook the faults of the past and to open a new page of relations based on understanding and cooperation, the two parties reviewed many cases which were the causes of enmity, doubts and diminished confidence which made Islam and Christianity remote from each other. The Moslem side followed with satisfaction certain paragraphs recited from the declaration issued by the Second Ecumenical Vatican Synod, especially those pertaining to a new outlook toward Moslems, and found in them a good initiative which will help to turn over the pages of the past, which have become the property of history. Both parties agreed upon starting a new leaf based on respect, cooperation, and joint endeavor for the goodness of humanity.

Eager to realize the noble objectives for which the dialogue was held, the seminar adopted the following resolutions and recommendations:

(1) The two sides affirm their belief in God, the only one, and recommend sustained, coordinated work, forming one front for the deepening of religious and ethical values in the souls of men.

(2) Both sides honor all prophets and apostles in all revealed religions and denounce those who discredit them or dare to disgrace their eminent position, for such an act is a protest against the will of God, who commissioned them.

(MORE)

(3) The two sides affirm that religion, in its essence, is the source of moral obligation and that it is the fundamental regulator of the behavior of individuals, communities and states.

(4) Organizing one's life cannot be accomplished in isolation from religion, which draws upon humanity plans for guidance and righteousness. The two sides accordingly affirm that religion is the basis of true legislation, and that all laws enacted by man alone will never reach the acme of perfection.

(5) The two parties affirm the...necessity to stand by the side of truth wherever it is, and to help the triumph of man, his dignity and his welfare. They invoke all moral forces in the world to incorporate this meaning in the behavior of men, communities, peoples and states, in order to stand against tyranny in all forms, to achieve the triumph of man's...and his freedom.

(6) In triumph of man's dignity, the two parties declare their condemnation of racial discrimination in all its forms and dimensions, as discrimination underrates the value of man whom God has honored.

(7) For the realization of human welfare the two parties affirm their concern by recommending the necessity of unifying efforts to draw up programs of development for the service of humanity...distribution and international transactions, as the existence of millions of hungry and naked people in all parts of the world constitutes a shame to humanity, and a degradation to all religious values. The two parties appeal to all states and international institutions and bodies whose tasks are connected with project of development to take into prime consideration this objective.

(8) The two parties affirm the necessity of freedom for religious belief, for the performance of religious rites, and the right of the family to raise their children in accordance with its religious beliefs. They denounce all types and forms of religious persecution and consider inhuman the regimes and theories which call for the persecution of believers.

(9) The two parties affirm that peace is a message of religion and look forward to its realization on the basis of truth and justice.

They appeal to those states which own destructive weapons to cease their production and invest their resources in serving peaceful purposes to realize the prosperity and welfare of humanity.

(10) Both sides believe that religion is a comprehensive perception of the universe and of existence, and affirm that science is a part thereof, and that all progress in the field of science gives new evidence of the supremacy of God, creator of the universe in the best of molds, and creator of its laws in accordance with rules whose accuracy and miraculousness science discovers each day. Science should always remain at the service of religion and committed to its values and ideals, and directed to the service of humanity, thereby restraining man from atheism and delinquency. These two ruin many youths of the world when they mistakenly imagine that science contradicts religion. When science supports belief it can succeed in liquidating many problems of youth.

(11) In view of the fact that an effective role is played by youth in building the future, the two parties recommend the necessity of giving importance to the curricula of education and its aids in schools and colleges. They recommend that among the fundamental aims of these curricula be the implanting of religious values and moral virtues in souls, and that they should avoid all what would degrade doctrine, morality and understanding among nations.

(12) Both sides encourage the translation of the divine books into all languages, and condemn any attempt to confiscate these books or prohibit their circulation in any part of the world.

(13) The Christian side expresses its desire that the Moslem side continue historical research and satisfactory interpretations with regard to the evaluation of the "Holy Bible," in a genuine scientific approach.

(14) The Moslem side desires that the Christian side spare no energy or efforts to remove the Church from the mosque of Cordoba and effect the removal at the earliest possible time.

(15) The two parties recommend the necessity of joint work to follow up the mistakes included in the school curricula, in textbooks,

in the books of some Orientalists and scholars regarding the beliefs of each party, in order to correct them in accordance with the beliefs of their holders. The Moslem side accepted with appreciation the initiative of the Christian side in seeking the advice of Moslem scholars in all that is written on Islam in the schools belonging to the Christian side.

(16) The heritage of civilization and culture are the property of all humanity, and humanity has the right to receive this heritage in a true way. Owing to the circumstances of past misgivings between the Moslem and Christian worlds, the two parties appeal to the universities, religious and theological institutes to act as host to visiting professors of the two religions.

(17) To effect real cooperation between the Moslem and Christian worlds the two parties recommend the ceasing of all attempts to divert Moslems from their beliefs by Christians, or to divert Christians from their beliefs by Moslems.

(18) Lebanon, a country dear to the hearts of both Moslems and Christians, has been exposed to a sedition of which thousands of innocent people were victims. Certain people of ill intentions, inside and outside Lebanon, have tried to describe the struggle as a sectarian one between Moslems and Christians. This slander does not only insult the Moslems and Christians in Lebanon, but it aims at exploding all genuine and earnest endeavors for a rapprochement between the Moslem and Christian worlds. The two parties, therefore, denounce the sedition which arose in Lebanon and refuse to stamp it a sectarian struggle, and condemn all attempts to judge it that way or distort the sublime, magnanimous coexistence, prevailing among the religious families in Lebanon.

(19) Desirous of narrowing the gap between the scientifically advanced states and the developing countries, and believing in the right of all the peoples of the world to their advancement, the two parties appeal to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to issue a universal charter to be sanctioned by the United Nations ensuring all peoples the

legitimate right to obtain scientific development and technological methods, and not shutting off this right from the Third World in particular. They appeal to UNESCO to ask all conferences which study questions pertaining to raw materials to entertain the necessity of introducing technology and its methods to the developing countries which produce these raw materials. The realization of this objective will forestall possible discord between the Third World and the developed world.

(20) The two parties look upon the revealed religions with respect, and accordingly they distinguish between Judaism and Zionism, the latter being a racial, aggressive movement, foreign to Palestine and the entire East.

(21) Abiding by truth and justice, fully concerned with peace and believing in the right of peoples to self-determination, the two parties reaffirm the national rights of the Palestinian people and their right to return to their homeland. They affirm the Arabism of the city of Jerusalem, and the rejection of Judaization, partition and internationalization projects, and denounce any violation of all sacred shrines. The two sides request the liberation of all detainees in occupied Palestine, above all the Moslem Ulema and the Christian clergy. They also demand the liberation of all occupied territories and call for the formation of a permanent commission to investigate the alteration of sacred Moslem and Christian sites, and to reveal all these to the world's public opinion.

(22) Should there be other difficult circumstances, as is the case prevailing in the Philippines, both parties shall undertake a mutual initiative to find an effective role leading to appropriate solutions based on justice and impartiality.

(23) The two parties decided to form a permanent joint follow-up committee whose task will be to implement the resolutions and recommendations above mentioned, to follow up any new problems which might arise therefrom. The committee shall also be entrusted with preparing for similar symposiums in the future.

(24) The two parties, with great esteem and consideration, greet Col. Muammer al Khaddafi, chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, who patronized this symposium and participated positively in its discussions. His deep concern in this symposium greatly contributed to its success.

These resolutions and recommendations have been agreed upon through the mutual understanding of the Moslem and Christian parties with regard to the meaning, aims and precepts of the dialogue.

The two sides agreed that the aims of the dialogue are the exchange, among the discoursing parties belonging to the two religions, of information, ideas and facts which will enrich the knowledge of each party about the religion of the other party, its history, culture and other particulars: thus, to clarify in a sincere objective way, the points of meeting and differences which might exist among them with a view that each party maintains its beliefs, commitments and attitudes in an atmosphere of cordiality and mutual respect.

The two discoursing parties seize this blessed opportunity to extend their heartfelt thanks to all those who participated in this symposium either by their presence or in taking part in the discussions, or by observations or by performing any activity relevant to the success of the dialogue, no matter how humble it has been, for it is great in the sight of God.

In conclusion we all thank God, the omnipotent, who helped us by his great mercy to live together in an atmosphere of perfect brotherhood during the days of the Islamic-Christian dialogue in Tripoli.
